

Early modern women's letter writing viewed through the lenses of portraiture and dramatic text

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This essay will explore the epistolary activity of early modern women through the media of portraiture and dramatic text. It will use two artefacts: the portrait of Mary Neville, Lady Dacre by Hans Eworth, and the text from William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, featuring the forged letter from Maria to Malvolio. Through these two artefacts this piece will explore the themes of reliability and autonomy in early modern women's epistolary activity and their influencing factors, namely the mechanical process of writing, and the sending, delivery and reading of letters.

During the early modern period, women's letter writing fulfilled many objectives. Apart from being a means of private correspondence, letters conveyed news and information, aided business and trade, and provided social interaction. In contrast to the expectations of the modern postal service: autonomy of composition, privacy, and security of delivery; early modern letters were often written collaboratively, and were liable to interception, forgery and miscarriage.¹ It is widely recognised by contemporary scholars that 'early modern epistolarity must be considered beyond the dyadic model of single sender and single recipient'.²

While many women wrote their own letters, it is difficult to ascertain the author with any degree of certainty. Holograph letters were handwritten by the person named as the author, but many letters were not holograph letters, being written by an amanuensis³, scribe or secretary, or even by other family members and servants. While women enjoyed a high degree of control over the texts they authored, the holographic status of a letter could not always be relied upon safe in the belief that the woman wrote it unaided.⁴ A letter might be dictated by others only requiring a signature from the sender. Sometimes secretaries employed model or standard letters, the forms of which could be adapted to the individual circumstances of a woman's particular requirements.⁵ A recent study by the historian Barbara J. Harris supports this observation, questioning whether 'women composed the letters in their hands or simply copied them from drafts written by others. No definite way of answering this question exists unless the letter itself contains that information'.⁶ Third parties often had access to letters during composition,

¹ Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.

² Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 23.

³ A scribe employed to take dictation, to copy, or to sign a document on another's behalf.

⁴ James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶ Barbara J. Harris, 'What they wrote: Early Tudor aristocratic women, 1450-1550', in *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by James Daybell and Andrew Gordon (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), p. 24.

dispatch and conveyance, leading to anxiety over delay and interception. The scholar Gary Schneider summarises this doubt as the ‘constant threat of destabilization’.⁷

The dramatic text in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (Appendix)⁸ focuses attention on the problems associated with variable authorship and illustrates Schneider’s ‘threat of destabilisation’ by highlighting the importance of idiolect, that is, the specific and distinctive way in which an individual uses language, as a means of recognising authorship and the authenticity of a letter. Maria copies her mistress Olivia’s style of writing and tricks Malvolio into believing the letter is of her hand, ‘I can write very like my lady your niece. On a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands’ (*Twelfth Night* II. 3. 155-156). To achieve this deception Maria would use materials, such as paper, quills, inks and seals in addition to employing a variety of skills, including the ability to write using a quill, composition, and an aptitude for linguistics. Maria is clearly educated and exercises her power and authority in the implementation of this deception. Maria’s impersonation of Olivia’s handwriting dupes Malvolio, who is concerned with the details of the writing on the superscription, ‘By my life, this is my lady’s hand. These be her very C’s, her U’s and her T’s, and thus makes she her great P’s. It is in contempt of question her hand’ (II. 5. 85-88). As the superscription to the letter contains neither C’s nor P’s Malvolio is clearly deluded, relying entirely on his belief in the authorship of the letter, which leads to his ultimate downfall. James Daybell remarks that, in the instance of this letter in *Twelfth Night*, ‘handwriting is not necessarily a singular possession or identity of a person, but rather a commodity that can be faked, an identity assumed’.⁹ Malvolio is tricked by Maria’s convincing forgery of Olivia’s hand, the choice of language used, and the personal idiolect of the letter.

This dramatic text illustrates the problematical nature of letters, which are open to authorial interpretation. Malvolio compulsively attempts to interpret the letter, ‘to decode “Olivia’s” *billet doux* with its notorious conundrums: “*M.O.A.I. doth sway my life*”’.¹⁰ Malvolio wills it to be written by Olivia, and in his delusion becomes caught in a ‘fustian riddle’ (II. 5. 107). His narcissism is a fatal flaw. He begins by trying to ‘make that resemble something in me!’ (II. 5. 118) and ends up finding his name, ““M.” Malvolio. “M” – why that begins my name!’ (II. 5. 123-4). Malvolio becomes confused by the rhetorical content of the letter, which adds to the destabilising effect, ““M.” But there is no consonancy in the sequel. That suffers under probation: “A” should follow, but “O” does’ (II. 5. 127-129). The change of metre in the fourth line of the rhyming couplets is a rhetorical device to indicate Malvolio’s confusion.

⁷ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, p. 83.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008). All quotes will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

⁹ Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, p. 71.

¹⁰ ‘Introduction’ to *Twelfth Night*, ed. by Keir Elam, p. 15.

Jove knows I love,
But who?
Lips, do not move,
No man must know. (II. 5. 95-98)

The change to prose appears to offer Malvolio some solace, 'Soft, here follows prose' (II. 5. 138-139). The passage of prose (II. 5. 140-155) forms the main part of the letter, delivered by Malvolio as a speech, in which he is manipulated and cajoled, by flattery and misdirection, into wearing cross-gartered yellow stockings, 'Remember who commended thy yellow stockings and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered' (II. 5. 149-150).

While Malvolio is convinced by the hand and idiolect of the letter, he is also certain that it is Olivia's seal, which was important both to secure the letter from interception and in communicating its provenance. Softened wax, usually red in colour, was used to seal the folded letter and then impressed with a ring seal that left an image in the wax. However, seals could be stolen, or get into the wrong hands, exemplified by Maria's use of Olivia's seal to deceive Malvolio. He touches the wax, which is still soft, and mistakenly identifies the impression as the one made by Olivia's seal, bearing the image of Lucretia, 'By your leave, wax. Soft – and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal. 'Tis my lady' (II. 5. 91-93).

The textual artefact from *Twelfth Night* exemplifies aspects of epistolary precariousness and vulnerability. Malvolio's discovery of the letter on the ground, 'What employment have we here' (II. 5. 80), illustrates the unreliability of delivering letters in the early modern period. There were constant threats of miscarriage and delay, 'where carriers had access to letters, miscarriage, interception and information leaks were continual threats, for letter bearers might open a letter, lose a letter, or expose a letter to another'.¹¹ A letter might be delayed for several weeks or be intercepted and changed in an act of forgery. In *Twelfth Night* a letter is used in the treacherous practice of deception and trickery, and this was not an uncommon practice in this period. Apart from 'the interception or physical manipulation of letters' texts,¹² which involved the composition of the letter, the recipient could be misled by delays in delivery or interception of the post. Interception of the letter by Malvolio is a planned act on the part of Maria; a strategy which emphasises the power of the material letter as a means of negotiation and of exerting control. This fictional letter written within a Shakespearean play serves to show some of the traits of anxiety and unreliability linked to early modern letter writing. The forged letter was written by a woman as part of a stratagem to deceive and outwit Malvolio and, as such, foregrounds features of epistolary uncertainty, namely recognising

¹¹ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

authorship, the dangers of miscarriage, interception, forgery, imitation of a seal, and rhetorical misdirection. In *Twelfth Night*, Maria exerted power through nefarious means by playing on the unreliable aspects of letter writing.

As the sole author of her letter Maria had complete autonomy; however, collaborative efforts, particularly when writing business letters or formal petitions, also allowed early modern women autonomy and agency. The second artefact, Hans Eworth's portrait, *Mary Neville, Lady Dacre*, illustrates the formal act of writing petitions through the symbolism of the painting (Fig.1).¹³ Daybell's study notes that such letters of petition, alongside 'suitor's letters, or letters of request (that is requests for favour) account for almost one-third of women's letters written during the sixteenth century'.¹⁴ The female role in social and political matters is illustrated by these letters of petition, which 'highlight female mastery of the literary, rhetorical and formal conventions of epistolary form and shed light on the skills, albeit textual and rhetorical associated with the courtiership and the pursuit of patronage'.¹⁵

A good petitionary letter would combine brevity with the persuasive use of rhetoric. It was essential to keep the reader's attention so petitions were often written on just one sheet of paper. The unreliability of sending and delivering letters has already been examined using the fictional dramatic text from *Twelfth Night*. Women's petitions too, were at risk of miscarriage and delay, and were also subject to the unreliability of reading practices. Petitions addressed to monarchs or government officials could be intercepted and read by intermediaries, or read in difficult circumstances, if read at all. There was no guarantee that a letter of petition would reach the addressee, or elicit a response. Letter deliveries were subject to the time constraints and dependability of the letter bearer. The notion of a letter being a private concern between writer and recipient is open to conjecture as many letters were a collaborative effort.

Both artefacts studied in this article share common themes, displayed through different mediums; both show the autonomy enjoyed by powerful women letter writers, both reveal uncertainty and unreliability attached to the sending and reading of letters. However, while the textual artefact shows Maria's power channelled into forgery and miscarriage, the portrait represents the formal petition writing of Lady Mary Neville in her attempt to influence the decision of government.

¹³ Image in Fig.1 is a nineteenth-century reproduction of *Mary Neville, Lady Dacre*, by Hans Eworth. A copy of the original (in colour) can be found at <<http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/719399>> [accessed 24 January 2020].

¹⁴ Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, p. 229.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 229.



Figure 1: *Mary Neville, Lady Dacre*, After Hans Eworth. Print made by Emery Walker. (The British Museum collection online; © Trustees of the British Museum)

The Eworth portrait of Lady Mary Neville, painted circa 1555-1558, is one of several paintings of the period, portraying women letter writers: Johannes Vermeer specialised in painting scenes of middle-class domesticity and featured women engaged in epistolary activity, such as *Lady Writing a Letter With Her Maid* (c. 1670); Gabriel Metsu painted *A Woman Reading a Letter* (c. 1662-5) and *A Young Woman Receiving a Letter* (c. 1658).¹⁶ During the early modern period, portraiture developed from being associated solely with royalty and the Court, to being a valued part of the conspicuous consumption of wealthy families. Newly 'risen' families, as well as older established landed classes, sought to develop relations with the Court through patronage of polite portraiture created by Holbein and his contemporaries.¹⁷ There were very few English

¹⁶ Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, p. 244-47.

¹⁷ Robert Tittler, 'Portraiture, Politics and Society', in *A Companion to Tudor Britain*, ed. by Robert Tittler and Norman Jones (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 458.

portraitists during the sixteenth century but Holbein opened up opportunities for Flemish, German, and Dutch painters from northern Europe, among which one of the most notable was Hans Eworth.¹⁸ Portraiture was not commissioned solely for aesthetic purposes but also to fulfill a role within a social and political discourse.

The Hans Eworth portrait shows Lady Mary Neville, in a formal setting with a portrait of her late husband, Thomas Fiennes, Baron Dacre in the background. Portraits, such as that of Mary Neville, conveyed messages and details within the composition; setting, costume and colours would all have had their meaning for the semiotically literate of the time. Each component of the portrait is symbolic, its main purpose being to represent and narrate the importance of Lady Mary Neville's correspondence through petitioning to re-instate her late husband's title and estate after they were removed following his execution. The half-length portrait, which is an oil painting on canvas, shows Lady Mary Neville seated at her writing table with a quill in her right hand, and an ink pot, a seal and a notebook, wherein she may be taking notes for her petition, are on the table before her. Lady Mary's left hand holds the place in the book, revealing wedding rings which denote her former and present marital status. The formal portrait is within a sumptuous setting; the tapestry wall covering features a climbing, red Tudor rose and a green velvet curtain hangs behind the chair which is of a red hue with golden, rounded finials. Lady Mary Neville was a powerful woman from an aristocratic family, indicated by Thomas Fiennes' coat of arms (three rampant lions on an azure background, with a carved inscription), featured to the bottom right of the painting. Lady Mary and her late husband are dressed opulently in black velvet; she in a gown and cap with a fur stole and a flower corsage at her throat which includes forget-me-nots, for remembrance; he is wearing a doublet and hat with a gold trim. The two faces are painted in semi-profile and are set at a similar angle to reinforce the subject matter of the portrait.

Colour is employed as part of the narrative to create atmosphere, show emotion, and to draw the spectator's attention to various aspects of the portrait. The most striking and most significant parts of the portrait are Lady Mary's face and hands and the face of her late husband in the portrait on the wall. The pale ivory provides a stark contrast with the black clothing. This portrait was commissioned to tell a narrative, to symbolise Lady Mary's fight for justice. Her pale face looks serious, determined and emotionless, her eyes gazing beyond her desk as if in thought. She is portrayed as a strong woman; a widow who challenged the Government and won. Her hands, highlighted by their pallor, are employed to hold the quill and to mark the place in her book as she uses her letter-writing skills to petition the Government. Although the portrait was painted some years after Thomas Fiennes' death, Mary Neville's black clothing,

¹⁸ Roy Strong, entry on Hans Eworth (revised), in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <oxforddnb.com> [accessed 24 January 2020].

representing widowhood and mourning, emphasises her loss and contrasts with the rich, warmer tones of the red and green colours of the background. Many letters were a collaborative effort and it is highly likely that Lady Mary Neville would have received advice in the consolidation of ideas necessary to draft a petition, as represented by the notebook in the portrait. In 1558 Queen Elizabeth I reinstated Lord Dacre's title and assets, as a result of Lady Mary Neville's petitioning.

This article shows how two artefacts from contrasting media can address the same topic, and each add to the discourse. It has established that not all early modern letters were written by the sender; not all had bearers that delivered the letter competently and not all recipients were reliable readers. Women's letters can be broadly categorised as: personal letters to relatives and friends; letters growing out of responsibilities as mothers, wives and widows; and letters of petition to members of government.¹⁹ The text from *Twelfth Night* is a personal letter which illustrates the view that letters were not necessarily the first choice for communication as 'too many concerns and anxieties surrounded their materiality – their production, transmission, reception and sometimes their disposal'.²⁰ Maria's forged letter highlights epistolary unreliability but also shows the agency that women had to exercise power and control through letter writing. Maria boldly forges her mistress's hand for her own ends. Lady Mary Neville uses petition writing as a means of taking on the Government and does not rest until her executed husband's estate and title are re-instated. Her efforts to protect her family show a powerful and resourceful woman. Hans Eworth's portrait illustrates the power achieved by early modern women in their quests to petition government. Women who could write with their own hand not only exercised control over their correspondence but achieved a means of articulation and self-representation, which could be used for personal or political ends. The two artefacts, literary text and portrait, address the activity of early modern women letter writers and provide an insightful view of their power and autonomy, set against a background of epistolary unreliability.

¹⁹ Harris, 'What they wrote: Early Tudor aristocratic women, 1450-1550', p. 26.

²⁰ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, p. 33.

Appendix

Malvolio [takes up letter]	By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very C's, her U's and her T's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand.	85
Malvolio [reads]	<i>To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes.</i>	90
	<i>Jove knows I love, But who? Lips, do not move, No man must know.</i>	95
	<i>I may command where I adore, But silence, like a Lucrece knife, With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore, M.O.A.I. doth sway my life.</i>	103
	<i>If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them. Thy fates open their hands: let thy blood and spirit embrace them, and, to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough and appear fresh. Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants. Let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises thee that sighs for thee. Remember who commended thy yellow stockings and, wished to see thee ever cross-gartered – I say remember. Go to, thou art made if thou desir'st to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants and not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers. Farewell. She that would alter services with thee, The Fortunate Unhappy.</i>	140
	<i>Thou canst not choose but know who I am. If thou entertain'st my love, let it appear in thy smiling – thy smiles become thee well. Therefore in my presence still smile, dear my sweet, I prithee.</i>	169

Letter from Maria to Malvolio, forging Olivia's hand (*Twelfth Night* II. 5. 85-173)

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